DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 106 918 EA 007 086

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TITLE Optional Alternative Public Schools.
PUB DATE Apr 75
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National School Boards Association (35th, Miami Beach, Florida, April 1975); Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC Not Available from EDRS. PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Alternative Schools; Community Involvement; *Decision Making; Educational Accountability; *Educational Alternatives; Educational Change; *Educational Objectives; Educational Programs; Elementary Secondary Education; *Experimental Schools; Open Education; Participant Involvement

ABSTRACT

The development of optional alternative public schools is based on four simple concepts: (1) in a democratic society people should have choices about all important aspects of their lives; (2) different people learn in different ways; (3) learning in schools should not be isolated from the world outside the schools; (4) those closest to the action, the individual school, should have the biggest share in the decision-making. Optional alternative schools include open schools, schools-without-walls, continuation schools, multicultural schools, free schools, schools within schools, and the like. Whatever it is called, the alternative school has developed in response to needs within its community. Although each school is individual, most of them share all or most of the following characteristics: (1) the school provides an option for students, parents, and teachers; (2) it has as its reason for existence a commitment to be more responsive to some educational need within its community than the conventional schools have been; (3) it has a more comprehensive set of goals and objectives than its conventional counterpart; (4) it is more flexible, and, therefore, more responsive to planned evolution and change; and (5) it tends to be considerably smaller than conventional schools, particularly at the secondary level. (Author/IRT)

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1975 NSBA CONVENTION/MIAMI BEACH, APRIL 19-22, 1975
SPEAKER Smith Vernon H. CLINIC NO. A-9 PROGRAM p.22

OPTIONAL ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The development of optional alternative public schools is based upon four simple concepts: (1) In a democratic society people should have choices about all important aspects of their lives. Our present monolithic structure for public education, in which children and youth are assigned without choice to a public school, evolved more by accident than by intent. Students, parents, teachers, and administrators should all have options among a plurality of schools. (2) Different people learn in different ways. This is all too obvious, but remember the psychology of learning is much newer than the organizational structure of the public schools. If we know that different people learn in different ways and at different times, what sense does it make to assign all the eight-year-olds in the neighborhood to one school and one classroom within that school? (3) Learning in schools should not be isolated from the world outside the school. Four national reports on secondary education published within the last year are unanimous in their criticism of the schools for isolating youth from society and for segregating youth from adults and from other age groups in the schools. (4) Those closest to the action, the individual school, should have the biggest share in the decision making. The local community, the families involved, and the teachers and administrators should all have a share in decisions that affect their lives.

Today it's no longer necessary to justify the need for alternative public schools. Since 1970, at least a dozen national reports on education have recommended the development of optional alternative public schools. Recently the Report of the National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education urged that,

> "Each district should provide a broad range of alternative schools and programs so that every student will have a meaningful educational option available to him."[1]

Over two thousand optional alternative public schools are in operation today, and at least several thousand more are being planned and developed throughout the country. These alternative public schools provide options for students, parents, and teachers within their communities.

When a community has several optional alternative public schools available, the conventional school itself becomes one of the options. And as you might expect, it is usually the most popular option. Obviously, the advantage that the optional schools have over the earlier reforms is that they don't require consensus. The families who are satisfied with the conventional school still have that option. For those families who opt for something other than the conventional, the risk is low. If the alternative proves to be unsatisfactory for some students, they can return to the conventional school. The alternative schools will not replace the conventional or standard school. They will be complementary to it so that coupled together, the alternatives and the conventional will be able to provide educational programs that are more responsive to the needs of more students.

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Types of Optional Alternative Public Schools

Since alternative public schools usually develop as responses to particular educational needs within their communities, there is no single model or group of models which would encompass their diversity. We can identify at least a dozen different models today, but the great majority would fit into the following types or into combinations of these types:

Open Schools with learning activities individualized and organized around interest centers scattered throughout the building.

Schools-without-walls with a concentration of learning resources in one location available to all of the students in the community. These would include such facilities as magnet schools, educational parks, and career education centers.

Continuation schools with provisions for students whose education in the conventional schools has been (or might be) interrupted. These would include dropout centers, re-entry programs, pregnancy-maternity centers, evening and adult high schools, and street academies.

Multicultural schools with emphasis on cultural pluralism and ethnic and racial awareness, and usually serving a multi-cultural student body.

Free schools with emphasis on greater freedom for students to determine their own educational goals and to plan appropriate learning experiences. While this term is more frequently applied to non-public schools, a few are available by choice within public school systems.

Schools within schools with a small number of students and teachers involved by choice in a different educational program. This would include the mini-school within the conventional school building and the satellite school at another location but with administrative ties to the conventional school. The school-within-a-school would usually belong in one of the six categories above.

A Recent development has been the school that is a cluster of mini-schools. Haaren High School in New York City, Quincy II in Quincy, Illinois, the New School in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, and Ravenswood High School in East Palo Alto, California, are all large high schools which consist of a number of mini-schools. As far as the educational program is concerned, there is no longer an identifiable conventional school or program.

Not all alternative public schools would fall into these types. There is at least one school where all learning activities are based on behavioral modification (Grand Rapids, Michigan), and another that is a non-graded continuous progress school (Minneapolis, Minnesota). Recently a few communities have started "back-to-basics" or fundamental schools.

Many alternative schools operate as voluntary integration models within their communities -- in Louisville, Kentucky; St. Paul, Minnesota; Philadelphia; and Chicago, for example.

Special function schools that serve students who are assigned or referred without choice would not be included. A school for disruptive students may be highly desirable in some communities, but it should not be confused with optional alternative public schools.

What Do These Schools Have in Common:

While each alternative public school has been developed in response to needs within its community, most of them share some or all of the following characteristics:

1. As previously stated, the school provides an option for students, parents, and teachers. Usually the choice is open to all within the community, but there must always be choice for some so that the alternative school has a voluntary clientele. The school population should reflect the socio-economic and racial makeup of the entire community. There is no need for public alternative schools that are elite or racist.

2. The alternative school has as its reason for existence a commitment to be more responsive to some educational need within its community than the conventional schools have been.

3. The alternative school usually has a more comprehensive set of goals and objectives than its conventional counterpart. While most alternative secondary schools are concerned with basic skill development and with college and vocational preparation, they are also concerned with the improvement of self-concept, the development of individual talent and uniqueness, the understanding and encouragement of cultural plurality and diversity, and the preparation of students for various roles in society -- consumer, voter, critic, parent, spouse . . .

4. The alternative school is more flexible, and therefore more responsive to planned evolution and change. Since the alternatives are being developed in today's age of accountability, they rely more on feedback and formative evaluation in the development and modification of their curricula.

5. The alternative schools tend to be considerably smaller than our comprehensive high schools. The median enrollment in alternative public schools would be around two hundred. Since they are smaller, the alternatives tend to have fewer rules and bureaucratic constraints on students and teachers.

The size of both elementary and secondary schools has been increasing for the last twenty years. Critics are now suggesting that schools can't be large and humane too. Proponents of alternative schools suggest that when students choose their school, there is a stronger loyalty to that which is chosen over that which is compulsory. Alternative schools report less vandalism and violence, less truancy, and fewer absences on the part of students (and teachers) when compared with other schools at the same level in the same school district. This may be partly because the students in the smaller school have a bigger share in determining the rules and regulations. Shared decision making is another characteristic of many of the alternative public schools.

Developing More Responsive School System

The development of optional alternative public schools is probably too minor a move to be called major reform. I prefer to think of it as a strategy for self-renewal. The development of optional public schools within the system is a simple and effective way to provide a total educational program that is more responsive to the needs of more families within any community.

Within every community and every public school system, the development of optional alternative schools should be considered. Many communities will find that alternatives are needed immediately; many will not. In some communities, principals and other administrators will perceive the need, but parents and teachers will not. In some communities parents will perceive the need. And in other communities teachers and students may be the first to feel the need for alternatives. The dialogue within the community is critical so that parents, teachers, and students will understand the availability of options. After such dialogue, a decision that the community has no need for alternatives at this time is just as healthy as a decision that the alternatives are needed.

Earlier I stated that the alternative schools would not replace, but would be complementary to, the conventional schools. Let's look at some of the ways in which these options will complement the standard program within a community.

Of course, the first and most obvious way is that these alternative schools will be responsive to the needs of some students that are not currently being met by the existing programs. Some kids need schools which provide for their different styles of learning. Some kids need small schools. Some kids need schools where they have more opportunities for self-determination and decision-making; some kids benefit from more learning experiences in the community including work experiences. Incidentally, some teachers and some principals need alternatives. It's no secret that we have good teachers and good administrators who drop out too.

The alternative schools can provide an exploratory or pioneering function. We can try out innovations in the smaller school that might be resisted in the larger school, particularly if they were to involve all students and all teachers.

The alternative schools will encourage the conventional schools to look at themselves more carefully. In many communities, there are long waiting lists for admission to the alternative schools. This creates a healthy self-examination on the part of the faculties in the conventional schools.

The alternative schools provide for more community involvement in the educational process. First through exploratory dialogue on the need for optional alternatives; second on the part of those families who are offered choices and who then must make decisions; and third by involving community members in the regular function of the alternative school.

The alternative structure provides a simple mechanism for continuous change and improvement. Already in some communities we are seeing the development of alternatives to the alternatives. The alternatives provide a structure that is more responsive without additional layers of bureaucracy.

The alternative schools provide opportunities for exploring and trying a wide variety of learning facilities. Already alternative schools are making use of various space that is available within their communities. But the smaller, more flexible, school could become a proving ground for new concepts in school design, new combinations of hard and soft facilities, and new approaches to matching learning environments with learners and teachers.

The alternatives provide new opportunities for the cooperative development of better teacher education programs. I don't think that anyone in education has ever been satisfied with the education of teachers. New optional schools provide a field base for new cooperative ventures between the public schools and the teacher education institutions.

But, most important of all, the alternatives will provide educational choice within the community. Attitudes of the community toward the schools will become more positive when they see real options available. Students and parents will feel a stronger loyalty to that which is chosen. Teachers and administrators will benefit from a clientele which comes by choice rather than compulsion.

The alternative schools provide an additional level of accountability to the school system. When alternatives are available by choice, you have a consumer market in education. When thousands of families place their children on the waiting list for a few hundred openings in the alternative schools, as is the case in several communities today, those alternatives must be meeting a perceived educational need. Community control of the schools is a highly controversial topic. Here we are talking about consumer choice, with or without community control.

I have intentionally omitted cost because there is little to say. Some alternative schools cost more; many cost less. But in general, they operate on the same per pupil budget cost as the other secondary or elementary schools within their communities. Sometimes modest funds are necessary for planning and development; sometimes they are not. Anyone planning an alternative school should plan to operate on the regular per pupil cost of education within the community, and should avoid the use of external funds in the basic operation of the school. As a district moves to alternative schools, there may be transitional expenses just as there are minor added expenses each time a new conventional school is opened.

The opening paragraphs from the North Central Association's Policies and Standards for the Approval of Optional Schools make an appropriate conclusion for these remarks:

> In recent years the concept of educational choice (optional schools, alternative schools -- call them what you will)

has penetrated deeply into the American system of education. It seems likely that in the forseeable future many different types of schools will exist side by side within the total educational structure, each designed to meet a different set of specified learning and living needs of young people. These schools will not be competitive with nor antagonistic to one another, but rather will be complementary in effort and thrust, helping American education redeem its long-term commitment to the fullest education of every child.

While the standard school certainly will continue to be the major institution in American education, it will not be the exclusive one. Other types of schools will develop, seeking to provide more fully for the total educational needs of the community. Widespread educational options -- the coexistence of many types of alternative schools and programs -- should strengthen American education as a whole.[2]

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